

Free Sample

The Case Against

Government Schools



(UPI)

THE MYTH...

It was a compelling idea, 170 years ago.

Everyone in the community would put aside their differences and go to the same common school. Admission would be free of charge, supported by all for the benefit of all. People from all different social backgrounds would learn to get along with each other, and start out life on an equal footing. Attendance would be required by law, so that no one in society would be at a disadvantage. Government, in all its wisdom, would mold the character of the young and eliminate bad influences. The schools, in short, would be society's bulwark against poverty, ignorance, and class strife.

This is the myth of the public schools. Today, no one even pretends that this beguiling vision is anywhere near being a reality. But we still cling to the idea that all these good things can be true of a compulsory, government run school system. So alluring is the mystique surrounding the idea of government schools that all the failure and oppression we can see does nothing to make us question the system. Instead, we spend more money, reshuffle the administration, or tack on a few new programs. Liked dazed grocery shoppers in a supermarket, we have "bought" the myth of the schools because of its bright and appealing package, without examining its ingredients. It is time to look beyond the packaging and examine closely what the schools actually do.

THE REALITY

According to the myth, schools were supposed to keep youth off the street and out of the hands of "bad influences." This rosy portrait of government schools as a positive moral influence contrasts cruelly with the facts about violence and vandalism in the schools. Assaults on students have increased more than 50%, as have assaults on teachers. Rapes and attempted rapes have also jumped. Even when violence is not present, schools are generally dispirited, repressive places. Teachers faced with this dismal situation spend much of their time keeping order, not teaching.

The myth of the schools touts education as "free," but of course, it is really paid for by taxation. Education has become the largest single item in state and local budgets, and the strain of supporting schools is causing a severe financial crisis. Tax revolts are erupting across the nation as school enrollment declines but costs continue to rise. 1977 alone saw massive tax revolts in the Chicago area, the Los Angeles area, and the State of

Maryland. In 1978 the entire Cleveland Public School system was shut down when taxpayers failed to pass a referendum. While the present financial problems are intense, it is important to understand that government schools have limped along from one financial crisis to another ever since they were started in the 1800s.

According to the myth, government schools are where all the different elements of society learn to get along with each other. This is a sentimental lie. The schools are--and always have been--a political and cultural battleground. Parents fight over what policies the schools will impose, just as people centuries ago fought similar battles over what religion the state would enforce. Should there be sex education in the classroom? What textbooks should be used? Should we rely on "progressive" teaching methods or go "back to basics?" Different groups have different feelings, but the government schools can adopt only one policy.

The myth promotes government schools as the "great equalizer," opening up the door of opportunity to the poor. Yet the facts expose this as pious nonsense. Whether it is blacks in the 1970's or the Irish in the 1840's, historical evidence shows that minorities and the poor have been victimized by public education more than anyone else.

To top it all off, government schools are doing a worse job than ever at educating the young. Urban schools routinely turn out high school students reading at the level of sixth graders. More people are spending more time in school, at higher per-pupil costs than ever before--yet proficiency levels are worse than ever. "As money spent has increased at an ever-faster rate since the mid-Sixties," says one expert who studied nationwide test results, "almost without exception, achievement has consistently fallen." The schools simply don't deliver on their most fundamental promise.

A crushing tax burden. Permanent financial crisis. Violence, social conflict, and stifled mobility. And they can barely teach kids to read.

The problems cannot be caused by a lack of money; we are spending four times what we spent in 1960. They cannot be caused by mismanagement or neglect; the schools have become a virtual laboratory of reform, modernization, and experimentation, all by highly professional administrators and teachers. Such fundamental failure does not call for tinkering. We must question the basic structure of our government school system, a system based upon compulsory attendance, a government-operated bureaucracy, and compulsory tax support.

THE UNDERLYING CAUSES

Compulsory attendance, a government-operated bureaucracy, and compulsory tax support. This is what the pretty package of the myth of the schools holds on the inside. These three elements are the keystone of the educational system. They have been firmly established and basically unchanged since 1880. Yet in all of the debates and proposals for reform swirling around the schools, these characteristics are rarely, if ever, questioned. We will make no progress until they are. Each of the serious problems plaguing the schools since their birth can be traced to the coercion and bureaucracy of government.

1. COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE

When we force children to attend school, we are literally transforming schools into jails. We should not be surprised, then, when the young people in them exhibit the violence and alienation of criminals, while teachers and administrators must take on the role of wardens and guards. At worst, school buildings become vandalized, graffiti-covered hulks in which violence is a daily reality. At best, they become places where bored and irresponsible students serve their time in sterile conformity. While other factors contribute, plenty of evidence exists linking the despair, violence and drug usage associated with public schools to compulsory attendance. An extensive survey of young drug users, for example, found that resentment of compulsory education emerged in nearly all the interviews. And it cannot be accidental that schools, more than any other institution, are the target of so much vandalism. Vandalism is youth's revenge against the institution confining them against their will. Present

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estimates put the annual cost of school vandalism at a staggering \$600 million; but this is only one of the ways in which we pay for incarcerating children. "Ask almost any teacher," says a report in *NEWSWEEK*, "what he or she considers the top problem in the changing city classroom, and the answer will be 'discipline.'" Teachers waste time maintaining discipline, the school wastes money chasing truants, and above all, learning is hindered by the presence of unwilling and uninterested students. Even school administrators, who have a direct economic interest in high enrollment numbers, admitted in a poll that enforcement of compulsory attendance is "futile."

Many middle-class Americans feel that compulsory attendance is necessary to help the disadvantaged. "Sure, they say, "we don't need to be forced into school--but what about poor people, children who grow up in ignorant families that don't value education?" This attitude is extremely patronizing, and overlooks that fact that for the great majority of lower-income people, economic realities make the value of education clear. As the black economist Thomas Sowell wrote, "Compulsory attendance laws and the compulsory assignment of children to particular public schools are among the heavy-handed procedures justified by the belief that low-income families either do not know or do not care about what is good for their own children. Because such a belief is obviously self-serving for the educational "experts" ...it is well worth considering the factual evidence on this crucial point. Today, in urban ghettos around the country, black Protestant parents are sending their children to Catholic schools. Even the modest tuitions of these schools are a burden to many lower income families, yet it is a burden that a significant number choose to bear." The demand for no-nonsense, basic skills education is stronger in poor, inner city communities than anywhere else.

Nevertheless, there are children running around who see no value in education and wouldn't attend voluntarily --both in urban ghettos AND wealthy suburbs. These are the youths that everyone is so solicitous about. Does compulsory attendance help them?

Absolutely not. Making education compulsory is the worst possible way to make an unwilling child value learning. It is similar to trying to make people into gourmets by force-feeding them. Instinctively, the youth knows that it is only brute force that keeps him in the classroom, and this transforms the classroom into a battlefield. The teacher soon discovers that he cannot compel the youth's mind to learn. He can only force his body to be in a particular place at a particular time, and hope that he will stay quiet and not do too much damage to the education of other children. The child is thus advanced from grade to grade without learning a thing. Here is the ultimate refutation of forced attendance: the youths who are the primary target of compulsory education are not getting educated.

Compulsory attendance does nothing to promote education and plenty to harm it. Why does it persist? One reason is that there are special interests that benefit from jailing children. The education bureaucracy--teacher unions, administrators, and education professionals--have a strong economic incentive in keeping as many children in school for as long as possible, to justify the funds spent

on them. Organized labor doesn't want children in the labor market taking jobs, so they, too, support compulsory attendance. But there are deeper reasons.

At bottom, forced attendance for everybody is caused by the school mythology about creating "one people" out of many and "teaching democracy" in the common schools. And most Americans really believe that compulsory government schools are an essential ingredient of democracy, necessary to hold society together. Once again, the myth of the schools has succeeded in wrapping some very pretty packaging over an ugly truth. Stripped of all rhetoric, the power to compel attendance at school is nothing but an attempt to control what goes into the minds of children. And that is too much power to let any government possess. No matter who does it, no matter how benevolent their intentions, that power is authoritarian, a constant threat to freedom, diversity, and democracy.

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When Americans see the uniformed masses of the People's Republic of China doing their compulsory readings from the Little Red Book, most are horrified at the sight of such State indoctrination. Yet how is compulsory schooling in America, both in its intentions and its effects, any different? Both are attempts by government to make people into the type of citizen the state desires.

Look at the history of compulsory education laws. They became popular in America in the last quarter of the 19th century, when great waves of immigrants came to America from overseas. One million people a year were pouring into the country, which stimulated feelings of bigotry and prejudice among native-born Americans. The new immigrants, they felt, were "inferior," and worse, might hold radical political philosophies. These fears prompted Americans to force the immigrants into public schools so they would give up their old culture and be molded into safe, loyal Americans. As one prominent educator wrote at the time, "The immediate duty which the community has to perform for its own protection is to school the children of the immigrants first of all into good Americans, and next into useful citizens." The writer did not assert that the immigrants would never learn to read without forced attendance, nor did he assert that they would never learn economically useful skills. He simply wanted to control them.

Forced attendance in state-operated or state-supported schools has always been a dangerous weapon of political control. In Germany in the 16th Century, it was used to enforce the official state religion, and to suppress other religions. Even in America, with its Con-

stitutional separation of religion and state, Catholics found it necessary to form their own school system to escape the Protestant-dominated, "public" schools. Nations in Central and Eastern Europe used compulsory attendance laws to dominate ethnic minorities and cripple their culture. Even today, blacks and Puerto Ricans complain about the cultural bias of public schools in America.

It is bitterly ironic, then, that forced school attendance is promoted as "democratic" and necessary for the preservation of "free institutions." Invoking the value of self-government, we have stripped people of the power to make crucial choices. In the name of freedom, we have subjected children to 12 years of de facto slavery.

2. STATE-RUN BUREAUCRACY

Why should the schools be run by government? Governments seem to have enough trouble running a postal service or a sanitary district without massive inefficiency, and often oppression and corruption. Why entrust it with the vital task of educating the young? It is even more difficult to think of any reason why, in a society as diverse as ours, government schools should operate as a virtual monopoly. Making education into a government-run, bureaucratic monopoly has made learning more expensive, more time consuming, and has turned educational issues into political brawls as divergent groups fight for the chance to impose their views on the rest of society.

Bloated Monopoly

The teacher in the classroom is only the tip of the iceberg; beneath the surface operates a vast army of administrators and technocrats extending across the state, federal, and local levels. A large scale study of the New York City schools, for example, showed that only 41% of its \$3 billion budget is spent on classroom instruction. The rest is top-heavy administration costs. Nationwide, from 1969 to 1974 the number of "supervisors" in the school system increased 44%--more than three times as fast as the number of teachers increased. Yet this happened while enrollment dropped and test scores got worse.

More importantly, the government school establishment, through its chartering and curriculum powers, defines what an "Education" is and in what kind of facilities it can take place. Through its certification powers, it restricts who can be called a teacher, and makes it much more expen-

sive to become a teacher. And increasingly, the students themselves are subject to all sorts of bureaucratic labeling and classification. In a nutshell, the school bureaucracy has become a self-serving special interest group, cut off from the checks and balances of consumer choice. It seeks to tighten its monopoly over "Education" and expand the range and cost of its services.

Schools vs. Learning

Teaching is stifled by the bureaucracy, not just in the schools, but in society as a whole. A parent, a neighbor, a brother or sister, a retired person seeking a few extra dollars, all may be fully capable of teaching a child to read, do arithmetic, or another skill. But this kind of learning--perfectly viable and effective in many cases--does not meet the official bureaucratic requirement. To be certified as a "real" teacher, you must have a B.A. degree, take a certain number of hours of "Education" courses, and pass a special written test concocted by the school examiners; you must teach in a certain type of building and follow a certain course curriculum. It is absurd: to be a Playground Supervisor in the Chicago Public schools, for example, requires a Bachelor's degree from an accredited college; 20 semester hours of Education courses; and 20 semester hours in "Team Sports or Individual Games;" "Arts or Crafts or Drama;" "Rhythms, Dance or Music;" and special classes in "Organization and Administration of Physical Education Classes or Recreation." Does anyone really believe that recess-time is made any better by the presence of these qualifications?

Even within the government schools, classroom instruction is severely crowded by bureaucratic duties. A common complaint among teachers is that if they filled out all the forms they were supposed to, they would have no time left to teach!

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Common sense would tell us that any person should be allowed to teach whatever they wanted, as long as students and parents felt they were getting what they paid for, and could choose not to patronize a teacher if they felt they were not. After all, no "certification" is necessary to open a grocery store. It simply opens, and if it is well-run and offers what people want, it survives. If it doesn't, it fails. But since schools are not subject to consumer choice, they must use some arbitrary, bureaucratic method of selecting teachers.

If parents and teachers attempt to set up schools of their own, they are often stifled or harassed by the bureaucratic requirements governing building codes. In-

dependent educators soon discover that any building used as a school must have front and rear exits, halls and stairways of a particular width, walls and ceilings of a certain type of construction, a certain number of toilets and wash-bowls per child, and so on. Such regulations go so far beyond the need for safety that few affordable buildings can meet all of them. As one outraged alternative school organizer wrote, "The building code, so blatantly and often tragically ignored in cases of...tenement houses owned by landlords who have friends within the City's legal apparatus, are viciously and selectively enforced to try to keep the free schools people out of business." Once again, inexpensive and effective ways of learning are regulated out of existence by the school bureaucracy.

Worst of all, recent years have seen an explosion of new ways of classifying and sorting students invented by the bureaucracy. Such devices as ability grouping, standardized testing, class ranking, classes for the "Educable Mentally Retarded," and career tracking cut out a pre-ordained future for the student. The schools are becoming a vast and powerful "sorting machine". The more importance we attach to school performance ratings, the more limited are a student's opportunities in later life.

And what could be more insane than uniform curriculum requirements in communities as diverse as those in the U.S? Many explosive political battles have been fought over what is to be taught in the government monopoly schools: evolution vs. creation, sex education, school prayer, sex-role stereotypes, permissiveness vs. strict discipline, and so on. These long and bitter conflicts would be totally unnecessary if we would simply recognize the right of people to choose whatever type of education they want. Why on

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earth should someone with religious objections to sex education be forced to send children to such a course? Why should someone who wants sex education not be able to get it simply because some other people in the community object to it? Neither person has any real quarrel with the other. Yet the schools, as a monopoly that can adopt only one view, set them at each other's throat. This is how the "common schools" promote social harmony.

If learning and teaching were the simplest, most natural activities in the world, the school bureaucracy would find a way to make them as complex, time-consuming, and expensive as possible. Any comparison of government schools with other forms of instruction confirms this. A government school in Washington, D.C. spends nearly \$2000 per pupil and pays teachers annual salaries from \$12,000 to \$23,000. On the other hand, a parochial school in the

same inner-city area spends only \$500 per pupil, and teacher salaries average one-half the salaries in the public schools. Yet the test scores of the children in parochial schools are two to three years ahead of their public school peers. There are many other examples. A private language school such as Berlitz--run at a profit--will have a child using a 1200 word vocabulary in about 6 weeks, at a cost of about \$500 per child for a class of 5 or 6. The public schools spend years in expensive language programs trying to achieve the same results. A private educational service in Connecticut took several high school dropouts who, after 10 years in the government schools, had no marketable skills. A few short weeks of training taught these dropouts basic skills and typing, and they were placed in corporate jobs. It literally takes the schools 12 years to teach (maybe) skills that can be picked up elsewhere in a few months or less. Is this a temporary problem? A mere aberration? Hardly. The school system was first criticized for being too costly and bureaucratic in the 1870's. The situation has only become worse since then.

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Why is the school system so dismally ineffective and wasteful? There is nothing mysterious about it. The schools are not subject to choice or competition. They need not set up their budget and curriculum with the goal of attracting customers; attendance and financial support is required by law. Their cost is hidden and indirect. Higher salaries, unjustified expenses, and long, drawn-out learning schedules cannot "lose customers" to faster and cheaper alternatives - - there are no alternatives. Given this separation of price and product, it is not surprising that a massive and wasteful bureaucracy has arisen, eager to take full advantage of the unchecked access to tax money, and willing to protect their monopoly by the use of government regulations. The real tragedy is that the schools don't just waste dollars, they waste minds as well.

3. TAX FUNDING

The schools rely on taxation for their support, and this is almost universally unchallenged. But the sugary promises of "education for all at the expense of all" is another part of the myth of the schools that conflicts with reality. Tax funding of schools brings with it a host of contradictions producing immoral and impractical consequences. An analysis of today's school funding crisis confirms this.

Consider what tax support for schools means: a large part of the money for schools comes from people who do not use the schools, do not benefit from them, do not agree with their methods, or see them as simply a drain on their local, state, and federal taxes. Education apologists may pompously reply that "education is for the good of the community--it is our obligation to support it." Fine. Try telling that to the elderly black lady in Evanston, Ill. who will have to sell her home of 24 years because of property taxes. She is typical of hundreds of thousands of senior citizens across the country. Try telling that to the growing number of lower-income city dwellers who pay for both tax supported schools and tuition at private schools, because the public schools in their area are so bad they refuse to send their children to them. Tell that to the small businessman whose prices cannot stay competitive because of an increase in real estate taxes on his storefront. Tell it to the apartment dweller whose rent just went up \$15 a month because of the same increase in property taxes.

Such a system is unjust, in that it forces people to pay for services they do not get. But it is a terrible system even from the perspective of the people who do have children in the schools. Bureaucratic special interests prevent the schools from cutting costs by pushing for higher salaries, lower class sizes, etc. Yet increasingly, overburdened taxpayers will not permit any new funding. The parents are caught in the middle. School districts in

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Philadelphia and Detroit, for example, are faced with deficits of hundreds of thousands of dollars, yet their pursuit of funds was voted down. As a school official in Detroit said, school taxes are "the only tax they can vote their opinion on."

The contradiction is insoluble. Freedom and democracy require that people have the right to determine how their money is spent; yet the fate of the schools is often in the hands of people who don't use them. Yet if schools were to be financed at a higher level of government--such as the state income tax or federal taxes--what would happen to the cherished idea of "local control" and community schools? The federal government now pays only 9% of the costs of elementary and secondary education, yet state school superintendents are already complaining that the federal government exerts "too much control" over education. If they assumed any more of the financial burden, schools would become more distant, less responsive to parents. There is no way out, as long as we rely on tax support.

What is more, the instability and injustice will worsen in the near future, because the population is getting older. In the past, most taxpayers were also parents, and thus received the dubious benefits of the government schools. But declining birth rates, longer life expectancies, and the increasing number of parents not sending their children to government schools means that fewer and fewer taxpayers will have children in the government schools at a time when the financial demands of the schools are reaching new heights. Clearly, the schools are headed for an irreversible crisis. Alternatives must be found, and quickly.

The Enemy of the Poor

But what would the poor do without tax-supported, government schools? Without them, wouldn't people on the lower rungs of the economic ladder be doomed to a perpetual cycle of poverty? Here, the myth of the schools makes it final, desperate stand. More than anything else, the existence of government schools rests on their reputation as the "great equalizer," the source of economic mobility for people who otherwise would never have a chance. This myth will be attacked head-on. Government schools, now as 100 years ago, are the great enemy of minorities and the poor. The bureaucratic school monopoly has worked against their economic mobility.

AFTER SEVERAL YEARS IN THE GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS, THE GAP IN TEST SCORES BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK CHILDREN INCREASES CONSISTENTLY.

To begin with, the benefits of learning should not be confused with the benefits of government schooling. No one can deny that it is economically useful to acquire new skills, nor that social advancement often relies on learning new things. The real question is whether the government schools help or hinder this process. We must look beyond the fact that government is schooling the poor and ask ourselves what effect that schooling has had on them. Does it--as the myth assures us--provide them with a ladder out of poverty, or does it keep them in their place?

Here are the facts: minorities and white children go into the schools with test scores not very far apart from each other, yet after several years in the government schools, black scores fall and the gap between white and black children continues to increase. This fact has nothing to do with unequal school facilities; often the worst schools spend more per pupil than any others. The Oakland Unified School District, in which 80% of the students are minorities, is typical of urban schools around the nation. 1977 test scores show that in the second grade, Oakland students are near the rest of the

country. But the longer they are in school, the more poorly they learn in comparison with their peers in other states. By the time they are in 12th grade, their scores are down to the 5th percentile, as opposed to the national average on the 50th percentile. Chicago Public Schools follow the same pattern. Yet students in private and parochial schools in the same neighborhoods DO NOT FALL BEHIND like the students in public schools.

There is nothing new about this. Back in the 19th Century, school "retardation" was twice as great for Irish and Italian immigrants as for students of native or mixed parentage. Around 1911, only 0.1% of all Irish children--and 0% of the Italian children--entering high school ever graduated, while native whites and groups with higher incomes graduated far greater percentages of their children. Obviously, this gave the more affluent groups an advantage in the job market--and a tax supported one at that.

The pattern of racism in government schools has occurred with dismal regularity throughout their history. In the 1840's, the performance of Irish children in school led to the widespread belief that they were intellectually inferior. In the 1920's and 1930's, "scientific" education researchers wondered whether Italians were mentally inferior by genetic endowment because of their poor school ratings. These facts are forgotten today, as the Irish and Italians are absorbed into American society. But the same tragic pattern is being repeated by blacks and Puerto Ricans. In San Francisco, for example, black children are herded into special classes for the "Educable Mentally Retarded" (EMR) on the basis of their I.Q. test scores. In 1971, 66% of the elementary schoolchildren in EMR classes were black, although blacks make up only 28% of the San Francisco school population. Results such as these act to stigmatize the children; as one psychologist has testified, "There can be a lot of negative consequences. The child feels inferior and ends up with low self-esteem." So much for the myth of school-created economic advancement.

This pattern of failure and stereotyping in the public schools is in sharp contrast to the efforts of minorities and the poor to run their own schools. Before the civil war, there were over a half million freed slaves in the South. These people were not subject to compulsory attendance; they were not permitted in public schools; and they were forbidden by law from running their own schools. Yet the Census of 1850 found 90% of the free blacks in Savannah literate, and in the South as a whole in 1840, more than half the free blacks were literate! This was accomplished by running "underground schools."

THE FAILURE AND STEREOTYPING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO THE RESULTS OF THE EFFORTS OF MINORITIES AND THE POOR TO RUN THEIR OWN SCHOOLS,

An Oakland Public School official, noticing the decline in achievement levels for minorities and the poor between 2nd grade and high school, asked in bewilderment, "What's going on between grade two and grade twelve?"

What's going on? The same thing that's been going on in government schools for over 100 years. Intelligence tests, "ability" grouping, vocational guidance counseling, and more subtle selection devices stamp some students as superior and others as inferior. Some are given credentials which open up job opportunities, others are denied those credentials. And as study after study has shown, children from affluent families end up getting the best test scores, the highest ability groupings, the best credentials, and therefore the best economic status. In practical terms, the difference that shows up in these ratings may be inconsequential. A person with lower scores may perform just as well in society as a person with higher scores; the whole ratings game is absurdly artificial. Yet employers--and especially colleges, which hold the key to economic advancement--select individuals on the basis of the rating they get in school. As Joel Spring wrote, "Students are schooled into their social place. The school becomes the first arena of social competition."

Some may suggest that government schools can somehow be reformed to correct this situation. But as long as schools are financed by taxation, they will not change significantly. Tax money is not "manna from heaven" that can simply be allocated wherever we like, with no strings attached. Taxation is a political process, subject to political pressures. It will therefore end up serving the interests of the most politically powerful people in society. In the late 1960's, minorities received a tragic and final demonstration of this fact.

The Lesson of I.S. 201

1966 saw the creation of a new government school, Intermediate School #201, in a predominantly black and Puerto Rican section of New York City. Community leaders, aware of the failure of other public schools, proposed that this school be made an experimental school with a significant measure of control in the hands of the local community. They wanted tax money, of course, but they wanted the power to select school principals, hire and fire teachers, determine the curriculum, and allocate funds firmly in the hands of the community. Under these conditions, said Preston Wilcox, one of the originators of the idea, "one can expect the school in the ghetto to become what schools in more privileged areas already are, a reflection of local interests and resources, instead of a subtle rejection of them." This experiment was an

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excellent idea except for one fatal flaw: its dependence on government financing. That dependence proved disastrous. Three years later--three years of conflict with the central school bureaucracy, teacher's strikes, school boycotts, and demonstrations--the community governing board never got the power it wanted to govern its own schools. Their desire to hire and fire teachers was crushed by the power of the teachers union. Their desire to control their own budget and purchase their own supplies directly would not be allowed by the centralized board of education. Their selection of school principals was ruled to be illegal by the courts because they bypassed civil service regulations. The use of tax money thus subjected the schools to outside control, and kept important powers out of the hands of the community.

But the use of tax money had an even worse effect after the schools were decentralized by a new law in 1969, and the governing board got some of the power it wanted. The availability of government money transformed many local leaders--formerly idealistic rebels --into bureaucrats as corrupt and self-serving as the ones they replaced. One disgusted member of the I.S. 201 governing board wrote that local education workers "envisioned an endless gravy train," which led to "poor programming at high salaries...nepotism, and the resurrection of every debunked poverty scheme developed in the last ten years." In 1971, two veteran members of the governing board resigned, saying "the cripplers in the past (largely white) have now been joined by destructive, opportunistic education pimps (largely black)." Financing with tax money simply created a new elite, corrupted by their automatic access to the pocketbooks of their community.

The failure of I.S. 201 makes an important point: if minorities and the poor want schools that really are a "reflection of local interests and resources," schools that are not culturally biased and do not brand them as inferior, they will have to pay for them with their own money.

This seemingly harsh fact is considerably less harsh than what goes on now. The "free" education provided by government is not only harmful--it isn't free. The poor do pay for education. They pay for it in their sales taxes whenever they buy food and clothing. They pay for it in federal income tax deductions from their wages. They pay for it in higher rents for their apartments, and higher prices for the products they buy. Yet despite these contributions, they receive no control or choice because the money is spent by the government, not by them. If the

money taken out of the pockets of lower income people and spent on education were returned to them, it could be spent on an education they could choose and control.

Evidence that this is the real way to mobility and learning is provided by the Oakland Community School, a private school in the heart of Oakland's inner city. OCS is educating black and poor youth whose language and math skills rate 2 or 3 years above their government school counterparts, due to its firm commitment to the development of verbal and mathematical skills through individualized instruction. This school has become well-known, and various "important" people have visited it, but there is nothing very astonishing about it. It simply proves what libertarians have known all along, namely that education is attainable by any segment of the population. It need not be as complex, long, and expensive as the bureaucrats have made it. The only remarkable thing about the school is that it happened in a society where nearly 45% of an individual's income is taken by taxes. It happened in a society that deliberately restricts the number of people who can call themselves "teachers" so that the skill will be more scarce and expensive. It happened in a society where learning is made more expensive by the imposition of state regulations covering what characteristics school buildings must have. If these restrictions and taxes were ended, independent education would thrive even more.

A NEW SYSTEM

The myth of the schools is dead. But what are the alternatives to a compulsory, government-run system? There are viable alternatives--and they are functioning right now in various places. How to liberate education from government is outlined below.

Freedom of Choice

At bottom, the goal of the libertarian alternative is simple: we should totally reverse the current relationship between the educators and the educated. The present system is authoritarian. The educational establishment tells people--with force of law--what they must learn, where they must go to school, what those schools must be like, how long to stay in them, and what "credentials" are necessary to get in them and to get out of them. Libertarians propose to reverse this relationship, and

allow individuals to choose for themselves what school . they will go to, what they will learn, who they will learn it from and by what method. Funding and attendance in any school should be totally voluntary. More specifically, the following reforms should be enacted:

- * Compulsory attendance laws should be repealed, totally and immediately.

- * The government school bureaucracy should be abolished or phased out; all schools should be run by individuals or private organizations. While the government schools still exist, people attending alternative schools should receive dollar-for dollar tax credits for tuition.

- * The power of government to charter schools, regulate their curriculum, and certify teachers should be ended. In addition, all laws requiring degrees or diplomas for any job or profession should be repealed.

What would such a system be like? How would it function? Upon examination, a learning system based upon individual freedom proves to be workable as well as desirable.

Voluntary attendance

The elimination of forced attendance, even without the other reforms, would put a breath of fresh air into the schools. The multi-million dollar costs of vandalism would be sharply reduced. There would be no more expenses for truant officers, hall monitors, and security officers to spy on children. Teachers and administrators would be relieved of all the useless, time-consuming paperwork caused by the need to keep strict attendance records. And all the special schools, special classes, and special personnel necessary to contain the child who hates school could be eliminated.

If students were in school because they wanted to be, maintaining order would be less of a problem. The entire nature of the school bureaucracy would gradually improve, as it became necessary to ATTRACT students into school, rather than take their attendance for granted. Perhaps most importantly, the students themselves would be matured and educated by exercising responsibility over their own lives. The most important part of learning to live is learning to make responsible choices; yet this is precisely what compulsory attendance laws make it impossible to do. John Holt said it best: "where in School are people ever given the opportunity to exercise their capacities for moral judgement? We use moral judgement only when we make choices, serious choices that lead to action--and no student can do that in School, where all the serious

choices and decisions are made for him by others. ...As Edgar Friedenberg has well put it, powerlessness corrupts. The Schools, by taking the power to make choices from their students, corrupts them."

Diversity

Government should get out of the business of operating and funding schools. Thinkers as diverse as conservative economist Milton Friedman and leftist sociologist Christopher Jencks have suggested that the government-operated bureaucracy be subjected to the competition of diverse, privately-run schools, allowing parents and/or children to choose among them. It has already been demonstrated that independent schools have been and are being operated with better results and lower costs than the public schools, in some of the poorest sections of the country. The Oakland Community School, and inner-city parochial schools are only two examples of many. If these schools did not have to compete with the government schools for students, they would flourish in greater numbers. Libertarians propose another incentive to stimulate the growth of private alternatives. Families sending their children to independent schools should be allowed to deduct tuition costs from the taxes. No one should have to pay for education twice--in taxes and tuition.

Under such a system, a great variety of educational institutions would come into existence. There would be "open classrooms" for parents of a 'progressive' bent, as well as schools where strict discipline is enforced. Minority parents might want a school stressing the culture and language of their particular ethnic group; others may prefer a school geared toward economically useful skills. No one would have to fear that a particular kind of education would be imposed on them. Of course, this range of choice will never be possible as long as schools are either funded or operated by the government; conservative citizens would not want their money going to "permissive" or "radical" schools, Protestant taxpayers would not want to see their tax money supporting parochial schools, and so on.

One of the major beneficiaries of the public schools are businesses and corporations, which get prospective employees selected and trained at taxpayers expense. Yet we have already seen that when businesses take direct responsibility for training employees they are trained faster and better than in the public schools. In fact,

because of the pressing needs for manpower during World War II, the U.S. discovered that even the most highly skilled industrial jobs, which supposedly take years of training, could be learned in a few months by people of average intelligence. If government schools were abolished then, businesses could take up much of the slack by means of apprenticeships. The costs of an apprentice's education would be borne directly by the people who benefit from it, rather than spreading around the burden in an unjust or impractical way.

De-control Education

Government should be stripped of the power to charter schools, require degrees for employment, and certify teachers. This is probably the most far-reaching reform proposed, and opens the door even wider for diversity and experimentation in learning. Deregulating education in this way would make learning an inexpensive and natural part of living. And there are some learning institutions already in existence which point the way.

Any community, large or small, has thousands of learning resources in them which government restrictions make it impossible to use. One person in a community may have a large collection of books on a subject another person is interested in. A professional craftsman may be willing to teach his or her skills, either for a fee or for the fun of it. One person may know a foreign language a neighbor wants to learn. Putting such people in touch with each other is one of the best and cheapest "school systems" ever devised. This decentralized pursuit of knowledge may be the education of the future.

The Learning Exchange in Evanston, Illinois was established on this basis. It is simply a clearinghouse of information. People who want to teach something are put in touch with people who want to learn something. Public response has been overwhelming. Listings of more than 15,000 people teaching over 2,000 topics are offered. With a minimum of **expense** and administration, and absolutely no coercion, the Learning Exchange allows any individual to make use of the vast amount of natural learning resources in modern society. A middle-aged computer programmer, for example, learns Spanish from a Mexican-American high school dropout, and teaches him computer programming in exchange.

The Learning Exchange has been copied successfully in 40 or more communities, and there is no reason why such a system could not serve as the model for totally replacing the government schools as a way of delivering education to large numbers of people. But it is first necessary to de-control education. The Mexican-American youth may be-

come as good a computer programmer as his teacher, but what good will it do him without a high school diploma or "official" certification of some kind? These regulations just make the learning process more expensive, and should be repealed.

CONCLUSION

Learning is not an unnatural act. A people given the freedom and power to choose their own way will pursue learning with vigor and ingenuity. Coercive bureaucracies only get in the way. Education, once and for all, must be freed from the heavy hand of compulsion and monopoly. To be against government schools is to be for education - - for all people.

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